

TWELFTH EDITION

Style

*Lessons in
Clarity and Grace*

JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS

JOSEPH BIZUP

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING CLEARLY

1. Distinguish real grammatical rules from folklore (pp. 10–12).
2. Use subjects to name the characters in your story (pp. 46–52).
3. Use verbs to name their important actions (pp. 32–39).
4. Open your sentences with familiar units of information (pp. 67–68).
5. Get to the main verb quickly:
 - Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses (pp. 140–141).
 - Avoid long abstract subjects (pp. 141–142).
 - Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection (pp. 143–144).
6. Push new, complex units of information to the end of the sentence (pp. 79–82).
7. Begin sentences that form a unit with consistent subjects/topics (pp. 70–73).
8. Be concise:
 - Cut meaningless and repeated words and obvious implications (pp. 123–124).
 - Put the meaning of phrases into one or two words (pp. 125–126).
 - Prefer affirmative sentences to negative ones (pp. 126–127).
9. Control sprawl:
 - Don't tack more than one subordinate clause onto another (pp. 145–146).
 - Extend a sentence with resumptive, summative, and free modifiers (pp. 146–148).
 - Extend a sentence with coordinate structures after verbs (pp. 148–149).
10. Above all, write to others as you would have others write to you (pp. 176–177).

STYLE

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TWELFTH EDITION

Joseph M. Williams

The University of Chicago

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PREFACE

*Most people won't realize that writing is a craft.
You have to take your apprenticeship in it like anything else.*

—KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

THE TWELFTH EDITION

This edition of *Style* is my second, but it is the book's twelfth. As I have revised the book a second time, it has inevitably become more my own. But it also remains emphatically Joseph Williams's. I added nothing I believe he would have rejected, and I only made changes I believe he would have embraced. "Writing has consequences," Joe wrote in a 1979 article anticipating his book: "Whatever does not bear on those consequences is irrelevant to our task—to help our students become what they want to be." I have worked with this ideal in mind.

What's New

In preparing this edition, I sought to amplify the book's central point: that good style is a matter of making informed choices in the service of one's readers. Here, specifically, is what's changed:

- I rewrote the section on pronouns and gender-neutral language in Lesson 2. It now focuses less on the problem of gender-biased language than on the many options available to writers who want to write in a gender-neutral fashion.
- I expanded the explanations that accompany the book's hallmark diagrams of the principles of style (Lessons 3–6).
- I revised the section on metadiscourse in Lesson 4 so that it outlines more fully the different ways writers can use this device.
- I included new examples of elegant passages in Lesson 11.
- I rewrote the discussion of sources in Appendix 2. This appendix still addresses plagiarism and the mechanics of citation, but it now

gives more attention to the stylistic effects of different ways of summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting.

- I modified the book's treatment of revision in two ways. First, I changed language that could seem to suggest that revision is a matter of editing only, that is, of holding the meaning of a sentence or passage constant while adjusting its form. Given his concern with how readers understand texts, Joe naturally focused on how writers could edit their prose to make it clearer for their readers. But he fully understood that writing is a complex, recursive process involving thinking, planning, drafting, rewriting, and editing, and that each of these activities could potentially affect any of the others. The book is now more careful to avoid implying, falsely, that revision means *only* editing. Second, I changed the terms the book uses to discuss revision, replacing *diagnose* and *diagnosis* with *analyze* and *analysis*. The book now presents revision less as a matter of identifying and fixing problems than as a matter of understanding and assessing options.
- I adjusted the book's examples, explanations, and exercises to soften their explicitly American perspective. This change acknowledges the book's global readership and is consistent with the book's core values. The book continues to insist, as it always has, that good style is an ethical and civic virtue.
- I tried to be more precise about the scope of the book's advice. The principles concerning the clarity and coherence of sentences and passages apply to prose of all kinds, but the book's guidance about more global matters of style—motivation (Lesson 8), organization (Lesson 9), using sources (Appendix 2)—is most relevant to various kinds of academic and professional writing.
- Finally, I endeavored throughout to improve and refine the book's explanations of its concepts and principles and to eliminate errors where I found them.

What's the Same

For all these changes, the book continues to address the same questions it always has:

- What is it in a sentence that makes readers judge it as they do?
- How do we analyze our own prose to anticipate their judgments?
- How do we revise a sentence so that readers will think better of it?

Lesson

1

Understanding Style

*Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can.
That is the only secret of style.*

—MATTHEW ARNOLD

*Essentially style resembles good manners. It comes of
endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them rather
than yourself—or thinking, that is, with the heart as well as
the head.*

—SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.
—GEORGE ORWELL

FIRST PRINCIPLES

This book rests on two beliefs: it is good to write clearly, and anyone can. The first is self-evident, especially to those who read a lot of writing like this:

An understanding of the causal factors involved in excessive drinking by students could lead to their more effective treatment.

But the second may seem optimistic to those who want to write clearly but don't think they can get close to this:

We could more effectively treat students who drink excessively if we understood why they do so.

This book shows you how.

In it, I consider writing from the perspective of reading. None of us can judge our own writing as others will because when we read it, we respond less to the words on the page or screen than to the thoughts in our minds. We see what we thought we said, and we blame our readers for not understanding us as we understand ourselves. This book presents principles—not rules—that you can follow to escape this trap. Once you understand why readers judge one sentence to be dense and abstract and another to be clear and direct, you can use this understanding to serve your readers better. You can also use it to serve yourself as you read. When you encounter writing you find difficult, you will be able to untangle it so that you can grasp (or at least guess at) its meaning.

The difficult, even daunting, task of writing clearly has challenged generations of writers who have hidden their ideas not only from their readers but sometimes even from themselves. Moreover, unclear writing is not just an inconvenience to readers; it is a social ill. When we read such writing in government regulations, we call it *bureaucratese*; in legal documents, *legalese*; in academic writing that inflates small ideas into gassy abstractions, *academese*. Written carelessly or, worse, deliberately, unclear writing is in its extreme forms a language of exclusion that a democracy cannot tolerate. It is also a problem that has afflicted writing in English for almost five hundred years.

A SHORT HISTORY OF UNCLEAR WRITING

It wasn't until about the middle of the sixteenth century that writers decided that English was eloquent enough to replace Latin and French in serious discourse. But their first efforts were written in a style so complex that it defeated easy understanding:

If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to [re]fine our tongue, of so great learning and experience which furnish matter for the [re]fining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to refine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by all those wits which they won't let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue has no certainty to trust to, but write all at random.

—Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582

In the next century, English became the language of science. We might expect that scientists would want to communicate clearly and simply, but the complex style had spread to their writing as well. As one complained,

Of all the studies of men, nothing may sooner be obtained than this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of metaphors, this volubility of tongue which makes so great a noise in the world.

—Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, 1667

When this continent was settled, writers might have established a new, democratic prose style for a new, democratic nation. In fact, in 1776, the plain words of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* helped inspire the American Revolution:

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.

Sad to say, he sparked no such revolution in prose style.

A half century later, James Fenimore Cooper complained about the writing of his day:

The love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected. One of the most certain evidences of a man of high breeding, is his simplicity of speech: a simplicity that is equally removed from vulgarity and exaggeration. . . . Simplicity should be the firm aim, after one is removed from vulgarity. . . . In no case, however, can one who aims at turgid language, exaggerated sentiments, or pedantic utterances, lay claim to be either a man or a woman of the world.

—*The American Democrat*, 1838

Unfortunately, in abusing that style, Cooper adopted it. Had he followed his own advice, he might have written,

We should discourage those who promote turgid language. A well-bred person speaks simply, in a way that is neither vulgar nor exaggerated. No one can claim to be a man or woman of the world who deliberately exaggerates sentiments or speaks in ways that are turgid or pedantic.

About fifty years later, Mark Twain wrote what we now consider classic American prose. He said this about Cooper's style:

There have been daring people in the world who claimed that Cooper could write English, but they are all dead now—all dead but Lounsbury [an academic who praised Cooper's style]. . . . [He] says that *Deerslayer* is a "pure work of art." . . . [But] Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language. . . .

As much as we admire Twain's directness, few of us emulate it.

In the best-known modern essay on English style, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell anatomized the turgid language of politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and others:

The keynote [of a pretentious style] is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill*, a verb becomes a phrase, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purpose verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*).

But as Cooper did, in abusing that style Orwell adopted it. He could have written more concisely:

Pretentious writers avoid simple verbs. Instead of using one word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill*, they turn the verb into a noun or adjective, and tack it onto some general-purpose verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. Wherever possible, they use the passive voice instead of the active and noun constructions instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*).

If the best-known critic of an opaque style could not resist it, we shouldn't be surprised that politicians and academics embrace it. On the language of the social sciences:

A turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences. . . . Such lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of subject matter, and nothing at all to do with profundity of thoughts. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

On the language of medicine:

It now appears that obligatory obfuscation is a firm tradition within the medical profession. . . . This may explain why only the most eminent physicians, the Cushings and Oslers, feel free to express themselves lucidly.

—Michael Crichton, "Medical Obfuscation: Structure and Function,"
New England Journal of Medicine

On the language of law:

But now, in law journals, in speeches, in classrooms and in courtrooms, lawyers and judges are beginning to worry about how often they have been misunderstood, and they are discovering that sometimes they cannot even understand each other.

On the language of science:

But there are times when the more the authors explain [about ape communication], the less we understand. Apes certainly seem capable of using language to communicate. Whether scientists are remains doubtful.

—Douglas Chadwick, *New York Times*

Most of us first confront that kind of writing in textbook sentences like this one:

Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English.

In about half as many words, that means:

When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translate great works of literature into English.

Generations of students have struggled with dense writing, many thinking they weren't smart enough to grasp a writer's deep ideas. Some have been right about that, but more could have blamed the writer's inability (or refusal) to write clearly. Many students, sad to say, give up. Sadder still, others learn not only to read that style but to write it, inflicting it in turn on their readers and thereby sustaining a 450-year-old tradition of unreadable writing.

SOME PRIVATE CAUSES OF UNCLEAR WRITING

Unclear writing is a social problem, but it often has private causes. Michael Crichton mentioned one: some writers plump up their prose, hoping that complicated sentences indicate deep thought. And when we want to hide the fact that we don't know what we're talking about, we typically throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complex sentences.

Others write graceless prose not deliberately but because they are seized by the idea that good writing must be free of the kind of errors that only a grammarian can explain. They approach a blank page not as a space to explore ideas, but as a minefield of potential errors. They creep from word to word, concerned less with their readers' understanding than with their own survival. I address that issue in Lesson 2.

Others write unclearly because they freeze up, especially when they are learning to think and write in a new academic or

professional setting. As we struggle to master new ideas, most of us write worse than we do when we write about things we understand better. If that sounds like you, take heart: you will write more clearly when you more clearly understand what you are writing about.

But the biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we don't know when readers will think we are unclear, much less why. Our own writing always seems clearer to us than to our readers because we read into it what we want them to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we send it off the moment it meets ours.

In all of this, of course, is a great irony: we are likely to confuse others when we write about a subject that confuses us. But when we become confused by a complex style, we too easily assume that this complexity signals deep thought, and so we try to imitate it, making our already confused writing even worse.

ON DRAFTING AND REVISING

A warning: if you think about the principles presented in this book as you draft, you may never finish drafting. Most experienced writers like to get something down on paper or up on the screen as fast as they can. Then as they revise that first draft into something clearer, they understand their ideas better. And when they understand their ideas better, they express them more clearly, and the more clearly they express them, the better they understand them ... and so it goes, ending only when they run out of energy, interest, or time.

For a fortunate few, that end comes weeks, months, even years after they begin. For most of us, though, the deadline is closer to tomorrow morning. And so we have to settle for prose that is less than perfect but as good as we can make it in the time we have. (Perfection may be the ideal, but it is the death of done.)

So when you draft, concentrate first on getting your ideas into words. Then use the principles here both to help you refine your ideas and to identify and quickly revise sentences and passages likely to give your readers a problem.

As important as clarity is, though, some occasions call for more:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle

against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

—John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Few of us are called upon to write a presidential address, but even on less lofty occasions, some of us take a private pleasure in writing a shapely sentence, even if no one will notice. If you enjoy not just writing a sentence but crafting it, you will find suggestions in Part Four.

Writing is also a social act that might or might not serve the best interests of readers, so in Lesson 12, I address some issues about the ethics of style. In Appendix I, I discuss styles of punctuation. In Appendix II, I explain how to use and cite quotations and other material from sources.

Many years ago, H. L. Mencken wrote this:

With precious few exceptions, all the books on style in English are by writers quite unable to write. The subject, indeed, seems to exercise a special and dreadful fascination over school ma'ams, bucolic college professors, and other such pseudoliterates. . . . Their central aim, of course, is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules—the overmastering passion of their melancholy order, at all times and everywhere.

—“The Fringes of Lovely Letters”

Mencken was right: no one learns to write well by rule, especially those who cannot see or feel or think. But I know that many who do see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully still cannot write sentences that make their thoughts, feelings, and visions clear to others. I also know that the more clearly we write, the more clearly we see and feel and think. Rules help no one do that, but some principles can.

Here they are.

Lesson

2

Correctness

God does not much mind bad grammar, but He does not take any particular pleasure in it.

—ERASMUS

Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style.

—HUGH BLAIR

English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment, and education—sometimes it's sheer luck, like getting across the street.

—E. B. WHITE

UNDERSTANDING CORRECTNESS

To careful writers, nothing is more important than choice, for choice is what allows them to express themselves clearly and precisely. Which of these sentences would you choose to give to your readers?

1. Lack of media support was the cause of our election loss.
 2. We lost the election because the media did not support us.
- Most of us would choose (2).

Correctness, though, seems a matter not of choice but of obedience. That does seem to simplify things: “correctness” requires not sound judgment but only a good memory. Some teachers and editors, in fact, think we can stay safe by memorizing and following dozens of alleged “rules” of correct grammar and usage: the truth, however, is more complicated. Some rules are real—if we ignore them, we risk being labeled at least unschooled: VERBS must agree with their SUBJECTS. (Words set in small capitals are defined in the glossary.) There are numerous others. But many often-repeated rules are less important than many think, and some are not even real:

- Never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*.
- Never use double negatives.
- Never split INFINITIVES.

If you obsess over them all, you prevent yourself from writing quickly and clearly. That’s why I address correctness now, before clarity, because I want to put it where it belongs—behind us.

THE SOCIAL AUTHORITY OF GRAMMAR RULES

Opinion is split on the social role of grammar rules. To some, they are just another device that the Ins use to control the Outs by stigmatizing their language and thereby suppressing their social and political aspirations. To others, the rules of Standard English have been so refined by generations of educated speakers and writers that they must be observed by all the best writers of English.

Both views are correct, partly. For centuries, those governing our affairs have used grammatical “errors” to screen out those unwilling or unable to acquire the habits of the schooled middle class. But the critics are wrong to claim that those rules were *devised* for that end. Standard forms of a language originate in accidents of geography and economic power. When a language has different regional dialects, that of the most powerful speakers usually becomes the most prestigious and the basis for a nation’s “correct” writing.

Thus if Edinburgh rather than London had become the center of Britain’s economic, political, and literary life, we would speak and write less like Shakespeare and more like the Scottish poet Robert Burns:

A ye wha are sae guid yourself
Sae pious and sae holy,

(All you who are so good yourselves
So pious and so holy,

Ye've nought to do but mark and tell Your neebours' fauts and folly!	You've nothing to do but talk about Your neighbors' faults and folly!)
--	--

Conservatives, on the other hand, are right that many rules of Standard English originated in efficient expression. For example, we no longer use all the endings that our verbs required a thousand years ago. We now omit present tense inflections in all but one context (and we don't need it there):

	1ST PERSON	2ND PERSON	3RD PERSON
Singular	I know + \emptyset .	You know + \emptyset .	She know + S .
Plural	We know + \emptyset .	You know + \emptyset .	They know + \emptyset .

But those conservatives are wrong when they claim that Standard English has been refined by the logic of educated speakers and writers and, therefore, must be socially and morally superior to the debased language of their alleged inferiors.

Here's the point: Those determined to discriminate will seize on any difference. But our language seems to reflect the quality of our minds more directly than do our ZIP codes, so it's easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency. That belief is not just factually wrong; in a democracy, it is also socially destructive. Yet even if *ain't* is logically correct, so great is the power of social convention that we avoid it, at least if we hope to be taken seriously when we write for serious purposes.

THREE KINDS OF RULES

These corrosive social attitudes about correctness have been encouraged by generations of grammarians who, in their zeal to rectify "good" English, have confused three kinds of "rules."

1. Real Rules

Real rules define what makes English English: **ARTICLES** must precede **NOUNS**: *the book*, not *book the*. Speakers born into English

don't think about these rules at all when they write, and they violate them only when tired or distracted.

2. Social Rules

Social rules distinguish Standard English from nonstandard: *He doesn't have any money* versus *He don't have no money*. Schooled writers observe these rules as naturally as they observe the Real Rules and think about them only when they notice others violating them. The only writers who *self-consciously* try to follow them are those not born into Standard English who are striving to associate themselves with the English-speaking educated classes.

3. Invented Rules

Finally, some grammarians have invented a handful of rules that they think we all *should* observe. These are the rules that the grammar police love to enforce and that too many educated writers obsess over. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century:

Don't split infinitives, as in *to quietly leave*.

Don't end a sentence with a PREPOSITION.

A few date from the twentieth century:

Don't use *hopefully* for *I hope*, as in **Hopefully**, it won't rain.

Don't use *which* for *that*, as in a car **which** I sold.

For almost 300 years, grammarians have accused the best writers of violating rules like these, and the best writers have consistently ignored them. Which is lucky for the grammarians, because if writers did obey all the rules, grammarians would have to keep inventing new ones, or find another line of work. The fact is, none of these invented rules reflects the unself-conscious usage of our best writers. In this lesson, we focus on this third kind of rule, the handful of invented ones, because only they vex those who already write Standard English.

OBSERVING RULES THOUGHTFULLY

It is no simple matter to deal with these invented rules if you want to be thought of as someone who writes "correctly." You could choose the worst-case policy: follow all the rules all the time because sometime, someone will criticize you for something—for beginning a sentence with *and* or ending it with *up*. But if you try

to obey all the rules all the time, you risk becoming so obsessed with rules that you tie yourself in knots. And sooner or later, you will impose those rules—real or not—on others.

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But then you have to decide which rules to observe and which to ignore. And if you ignore an alleged rule, you may have to deal with someone whose passion for “good” grammar makes her see in your split infinitive a sign of intellectual flabbiness, moral corruption, and social decay.

If you want to avoid being accused of “lacking standards” but refuse to submit to whatever “rule” someone can dredge up from tenth-grade English, you have to know more about these invented rules than the rule-mongers do. The rest of this lesson helps you do just that.

TWO KINDS OF INVENTED RULES

We can sort most invented rules into two groups: Folklore and Elegant Options.

Folklore

These rules include those that most careful readers and writers ignore. You may not yet have had some of them inflicted on you, but chances are that you will. In what follows, the quotations that illustrate “violations” of these rules are from writers of considerable intellectual and scholarly stature or who, on matters of usage, are reliable conservatives (some are both). A check mark indicates acceptable Standard English, despite what some grammarians claim.

1. **“Don’t begin sentences with *and* or *but*.”** This passage ignores the “rule” twice:

- ✓ **But**, it will be asked, is tact not an individual gift, therefore highly variable in its choices? **And** if that is so, what guidance can a manual offer, other than that of its author’s prejudices—mere impressionism?

—Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage: A Guide*, edited and completed by Jacques Barzun et al.

Some inexperienced writers do begin too many sentences with *and*, but that is an error not in grammar but of style.

Some insecure writers also think they should not begin a sentence with *because*. Allegedly not this:

- ✓ **Because** we have access to so much historical fact, today we know a good deal about changes within the humanities which were not apparent to those of any age much before our own and which the individual scholar must constantly reflect on.

—Walter Ong, S. J., “The Expanding Humanities and the Individual Scholar,” *Publication of the Modern Language Association*

This folklore about *because* appears in no handbook I know of, but it is gaining currency. It probably stems from advice aimed at avoiding sentence FRAGMENTS like this one:

The plan was rejected. **Because** it was incomplete.

QUICK TIP At best, this rule reflects a small truth of style. As you will see in Lesson 5, readers prefer sentences to begin with information they know and to proceed to information they don’t. But SUBORDINATE CLAUSES beginning with *because* usually convey new information, and so putting one at the beginning of a sentence can be mildly awkward. To begin a sentence with a CLAUSE expressing familiar information about causation, use *since* rather than *because*, because *since* implies that the reader already knows what’s in the clause:

- ✓ Since our language seems to reflect our quality of mind, it is easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical “errors” indicate mental or moral deficiency.

There are exceptions to this principle, but it’s generally sound.

2. “Use the RELATIVE PRONOUN *that*—not *which*—for RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES.” Allegedly not this:

- ✓ Next is a typical situation **which** a practiced writer corrects “for style” virtually by reflex action.

—Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct*

Yet just a few sentences before, Barzun himself (one of our most eminent intellectual historians and critics of style) had asserted:

Us[e] *that* with defining [i.e., restrictive] clauses except when stylistic reasons interpose.

This “rule” is relatively new. It first appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler’s *The King’s English*. The Fowlers thought that the random variation between *that* and *which* to begin a restrictive clause was messy, so they just asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES.

A nonrestrictive clause modifies a noun naming a referent that you can identify unambiguously without the information in that clause. For example:

✓ ABCO Inc. ended its first bankruptcy, **which** it had filed in 2012.

A company can have only one first bankruptcy, so we can unambiguously identify the bankruptcy without the information in the following clause. We therefore call that clause *nonrestrictive*, because it does not further “restrict” or identify what the noun names. In that context, we put a comma before the modifying clause and begin it with *which*. This rule is based on historical and contemporary usage.

But the Fowlers sought to limit *which* to nonrestrictive clauses only. For restrictive clauses, they prescribed *that*. For example:

✓ ABCO Inc. sold a product **that** [*not which*] made millions.

Since ABCO presumably makes many products, the clause *that made millions* “restricts” the product to the one that made millions, and so, according to the Fowlers, it should begin with *that*. (For another allegedly incorrect *which*, see the passage by Walter Ong on p. 14.)

Francis died in 1918, but Henry continued the family tradition with his 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. In that landmark work, he discussed the finer points of *which* and *that*, and then made this wistful observation:

Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.

I confess I follow the Fowlers’ advice, not because a restrictive *which* is an error, but because *that* has a softer sound. I do sometimes choose a *which* when it’s within a word or two of a *that*, because I don’t like the sound of two *thats* close together:

✓ We all have **that** one rule **that** we will not give up.

3. **“Use *fewer* with nouns you count, *less* with nouns you cannot.”** Allegedly not this:

- ✓ I can remember no **less** than five occasions when the correspondence columns of *The Times* rocked with volleys of letters. . . .

—Noel Gilroy Annan, Lord Annan, “The Life of the Mind in British Universities Today,” *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*

No one uses *fewer* with mass nouns (*fewer dirt*) but educated writers often use *less* with countable plural nouns (*less resources*).

4. **“Use *since* and *while* to refer only to time, not to mean *because* or *although*.”** Most careful writers use *since* with a meaning close to *because* but, as mentioned above, with an added sense of “What follows I assume you already know”:

- ✓ **Since** asbestos is dangerous, it should be removed carefully.

Nor do most careful writers restrict *while* to its temporal sense (*We’ll wait while you eat*). They use it also with a meaning close to “I assume you know what I state in this clause, but what I assert in the next will qualify it”:

- ✓ **While** we agree on a date, we disagree about the place.

Here’s the point: If writers whom we judge to be competent regularly violate some alleged rule and most careful readers never notice, then the rule has no force. In those cases, it is not writers who should change their usage, but grammarians who should change their rules.

Elegant Options

These next “rules” complement the Real Rules. Most readers do not notice when you observe these Real Rules, but does when you violates them (like that). On the other hand, few readers notice when you violate these elegant options, but some do when you observe them, because doing so makes your writing seem just a bit more self-consciously formal.

1. **“Don’t split infinitives.”** Purists condemn Dwight Macdonald, himself a linguistic archconservative, for this sentence (my emphasis in all the examples that follow):

- ✓ One wonders why Dr. Gove and his editors did not think of labeling *known* as substandard right where it occurs, and one suspects ~~that~~ they wanted **to slightly conceal** the fact. . . .

—"The String Untuned," *The New Yorker*

They would require

they wanted **to conceal slightly** the fact. . . .

Infinitives are split so often that when you avoid splitting one, careful readers may think you are trying to be especially correct, whether you are or not.

1. "Use *whom* as the **OBJECT of a verb or preposition**." Purists would condemn William Zinsser for this use of *who*:

- ✓ Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: "**Who** am I writing for?"

—*On Writing Well*

They would insist on

another question will occur to you: "For **whom** am I writing?"

Here is an actual rule: use *who* when it is the subject of a verb in its own clause; use *whom* only when it is an object in its own clause.

2. "Don't end a sentence with a preposition." Purists condemn Sir Ernest Gowers, editor of the second edition of Fowler's *Dictionary*, for this:

- ✓ The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official **with**.

—*The Complete Plain Words*

They insist on this:

. . . a stick **with which** to beat the official.

The first is correct; the second is more formal. (Again, see the Ong passage on p. 14.) And when you choose to shift both the preposition and its *whom* to the left, your sentence seems more formal yet. Compare:

- ✓ The man I met **with** was the man I had written **to**.
- ✓ The man **with whom** I met was the man **to whom** I had written.

A preposition can, however, end a sentence weakly (see pp. 82–83). George Orwell may have chosen to end this

next sentence with *from* to make a sly point about English grammar, but I suspect it just ended up there (and note the “incorrect” *which*):

[The defense of the English language] has nothing to do with . . . the setting up of a “standard English” **which** must never be departed **from**.

—“Politics and the English Language”

This would have been less awkward and more emphatic:

We do not defend English just to create a “standard English” whose rules we must always obey.

4. “**Use the singular with *none* and *any*.**” *None* and *any* were originally singular, but today most writers use them as plural, so if you use them as singular, some readers will notice. The second sentence is a bit more formal than the first:

✓ **None** of the reasons **are** sufficient to end the project.

✓ **None** of the reasons **is** sufficient to end the project.

When you are under close scrutiny, you might choose to observe all these optional rules. Ordinarily, though, most careful writers ignore them, which is to say they are not rules at all but rather stylistic choices that create a formal tone. If you adopt the worst-case approach and observe them all, all the time, few readers will give you credit but many will notice how formal you seem.

HOBGOBLINS

For some unknown reason, a handful of items have become the object of particularly zealous abuse. There’s no explaining why; none of them interferes with clarity or concision.

1. “**Never use *like* for *as* or *as if*.**” Allegedly, not this:

✓ These operations failed **like** the earlier ones did.

But this:

✓ These operations failed **as** the earlier ones did.

Like became a SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION in the eighteenth century when writers began to drop *as* from the conjunctive PHRASE *like as*, leaving just *like* as the CONJUNCTION.

This process is called *elision*, and it is a common linguistic change. It is telling that when editing the second edition of *Fowler's Dictionary* (the one favored by conservatives), Gowers deleted *like* for *as* from Fowler's list of "Illiteracies" and moved it into the category of "Sturdy Indefensibles."

2. **"Don't use *hopefully* to mean 'I hope.'**" Allegedly, not this:

- ✓ Hopefully, it will not rain.

But this:

- ✓ I hope that it will not rain.

This "rule" dates from the middle of the twentieth century. It has no basis in logic or grammar, as the allegedly incorrect use of *hopefully* parallels the usage of other words that no one complains about, words such as *candidly*, *frankly*, *sadly*, and *happily*:

- ✓ Candidly, we may fail. (That is, *I am candid when I say we may fail.*)

- ✓ Sadly, we must go. (That is, *I am sad when I say we must go.*)

3. **"Don't use *finalize* to mean 'finish' or 'complete.'**" But *finalize* doesn't mean just "finish." It means "to clean up the last few details," a sense captured by no other word.

4. **"Don't use *impact* as a verb but only as a noun."** Some would object to this:

- ✓ The survey impacted our strategy.

And insist on this:

- ✓ The survey had an impact on our strategy.

Impact has been a verb for 400 years, but on some people, historical evidence has none.

5. **"Don't modify absolute words such as *perfect*, *unique*, *final*, or *complete* with *very*, *more*, *quite*, and so on."** That rule would have deprived us of this familiar sentence:

- ✓ We the People of the United States, in order to form a **more perfect** union. . . .

(Even so, this is a rule generally worth following.)

6. **"Never ever use *irregardless* for *regardless* or *irrespective*."** However arbitrary this rule is, follow it. Use *irregardless* and some will judge you irredeemable.

SOME WORDS THAT ATTRACT SPECIAL ATTENTION

Some words are so often confused with others that careful readers are likely to note when you correctly distinguish them. Here are some:

aggravate means “to make worse.” Fastidious readers may object if you use it to mean “annoy.”

anticipate means “to prepare for a contingency.” It does not mean just “expect.” You anticipate a question when you prepare its answer before it’s asked; if you know it’s coming but don’t prepare, you only expect it.

anxious means “uneasy” not “eager.” You’re eager to leave if you’re happy to go. You’re anxious about leaving if it makes you nervous.

blackmail means “to extort by threatening to reveal damaging information.” It does not mean simply “coerce.” One country cannot blackmail another with nuclear weapons when it only threatens to use them.

cohort means “a group who attends on someone.” It does not mean a single accompanying person. When Prince William married Kate Middleton, she became his consort; his hangers-on are still his cohort.

comprise means “to include all parts in a single unit.” It is not synonymous with *compose* or *constitute*. The alphabet is not comprised by its letters; it comprises them. Letters constitute the alphabet, which is thus constituted by them.

continuous means “without interruption.” It is not synonymous with *continual*, which means an activity continued through time, with interruptions. If you continuously interrupt someone, that person will never say a word because your interruption will never stop. If you continually interrupt, you let the other person finish a sentence from time to time.

disinterested means “neutral.” It does not mean “uninterested.” A judge should be disinterested in the outcome of a case but not uninterested in it. (Incidentally, the original meaning of *disinterested* was “to be uninterested.”)

enormity means “hugely bad.” It does not mean “enormous.” In private, a belch might be enormous, but at a state funeral, it would also be an enormity.

flaunt means “to display conspicuously.” It is not synonymous with *flout*, which means “to scorn a rule or standard.” If you choose to scorn this distinction, you would not flout your flaunting it but flaunt your flouting it.

fortuitous means “by chance.” It does not mean “fortunate.” You are fortunate when you fortuitously pick the right number in the lottery.

fulsome means “sickeningly excessive.” It does not mean just “much.”

We all enjoy praise, except when it becomes fulsome.

notorious means “known for bad behavior.” It does not mean “famous.” Frank Sinatra was a famous singer but a notorious bully.

simplistic does not mean merely “simple.” It means “overly simple” and is usually used in a pejorative sense. A simple solution to a problem is often best; a simplistic solution never is.

These days, many readers won’t care about these distinctions, but some will. And they may be just those whose judgment carries weight when it matters most.

On the other hand, as an educated writer, you are expected to correctly distinguish *imply* and *infer*, *principal* and *principle*, *accept* and *except*, *capital* and *capitol*, *affect* and *effect*, *proceed* and *precede*, *discrete* and *discreet*. Most careful readers also notice when a Latinate or Greek plural noun is used as a singular, so you might want to keep these straight, too:

Singular	datum	criterion	medium	stratum	phenomenon
Plural	data	criteria	media	strata	phenomena

Here’s the point: You can’t predict good grammar or correct usage by logic or general rule. You have to learn the rules one-by-one and accept the fact that many of them are arbitrary and idiosyncratic.

PRONOUNS AND GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

Pronouns and Their Referents

Just as we expect verbs to agree with their subjects, so we expect pronouns to agree with their antecedents. Not this:

Early **efforts** to oppose surveillance of ordinary citizens failed because **it** ignored political issues. **No one** wanted to expose **themselves** to the charge of being unpatriotic.

But this:

- ✓ Early **efforts** to oppose surveillance of ordinary citizens failed because **they** ignored political issues. **No one** wanted to expose **himself** to the charge of being unpatriotic.

But making pronouns agree with their referents, you might have noticed, raises two problems.

First, do we use a singular or plural pronoun when referring to a noun that is singular in grammar but plural in meaning? Some writers use a singular verb and pronoun when the group acts as a single entity:

✓ The **committee** HAS met but has not yet made **its** decision.

But they use a plural verb and pronoun when its members act individually:

✓ The **faculty** HAVE the memo, but not all of **them** have read it.

These days plurals are irregularly used in both senses (but the plural is the rule in British English).

Second, what pronoun do we use to refer to singular common nouns that signal no gender, such as *teacher*, *doctor*, or *student*, or to pronouns that are singular in form but indeterminate or plural in meaning, such as *someone*, *anyone*, or *everyone*? We casually use *they*:

Every **student** knows that to get good grades, **they** must take **their** classes seriously. If **someone** won't do **their** work, it is very hard for **them** to succeed.

In formal writing, though, most careful writers and readers still want a singular pronoun. The convention was once that a feminine third-person singular pronoun (*she*, *her*, *hers*) could be used only when its referent was unambiguously female and that the masculine pronoun (*he*, *him*, *his*) should be used in all other cases. But that rule leads to sentences that today seem socially and stylistically awkward:

Every **student** knows that to get good grades, **he** must take **his** classes seriously. If **someone** won't do **his** work, it is very hard for **him** to succeed.

If, however, we reject the singular *they* because some (including me) consider it improper in formal writing, and we likewise reject *he* because some (also including me) regard it as biased, we are then confronted with a tricky problem of style. The thing to remember is that we have choices.

Gender-Neutral Options

We wouldn't have to face such conundrums if, like many other languages, English had a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun. Luckily, English offers good options to careful writers who want to write in a gender-neutral fashion. Here are four, in detail.

1. **Replace the gendered pronoun with another pronoun or with a noun.** In English, only third-person singular pronouns are explicitly gendered, and you can often simply replace them.

Use both the masculine and feminine pronouns: You can replace a masculine pronoun with the masculine and feminine pronouns together.

A careful **writer** will always consider the needs of **his** readers.

- ✓ A careful **writer** will always consider the needs of **his or her** readers.

But this solution is not entirely inclusive, as some people identify as neither male nor female. And it can be cumbersome if a sentence contains several pronouns.

Substitute plurals for singulars: In English, plural pronouns are gender neutral and can refer to categories or classes.

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants **his** readers to see **him** as modern and progressive.

- ✓ **Writers** should use gender-neutral language if **they** want **their** readers to see **them** as modern and progressive.

But since we usually expect abstractions to be singular, using the plural can sometimes change the meaning.

Substitute the first-person plural pronoun: In English, first-person pronouns are gender-neutral, and we can use them in their plural form generically.

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants **his** readers to see **him** as modern and progressive.

- ✓ **We** should use gender-neutral language in **our** writing if **we** want **our** readers to see **us** as modern and progressive.

But *we* can be ambiguous, and in some contexts, it can sound too formal.

Substitute the indefinite pronoun “one”: This pronoun is also gender neutral, so one may use it as well.

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants to seem modern and progressive.

- ✓ **One** should use gender-neutral language if **one** wants to seem modern and progressive.

But even more than *we*, *one* can sound stiff.

Repeat the noun: In English, nouns aren't gendered, so you can avoid pronouns by repeating those nouns.

If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, **he** should use gender-neutral language.

- ✓ If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, **the writer** should use gender-neutral language.

But repeating a noun, especially more than once, can sound stiff.

2. **Cut a gendered pronoun when that doesn't change the meaning.** You can sometimes replace a pronoun with another kind of word or cut it altogether.

Replace a possessive pronoun with an article or other determiner: If you want to use a singular count noun, you can replace a possessive pronoun with another DETERMINER (italicized) such as an article or quantifier.

A **writer** can impress *his* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

- ✓ A **writer** can impress *a* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.
- ✓ A **writer** can impress *each* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

Cut the pronoun: If you use a plural noun, you can sometimes simply cut a redundant POSSESSIVE.

- ✓ A **writer** can impress **readers** by using gender-neutral language.

But not all possessives are redundant. Compare these:

A passionate **writer** treasures **his books**.

- ✓ A passionate **writer** treasures **books**.

3. **Avoid a gendered pronoun by choosing a different grammatical construction.** If you can't replace or cut a gendered pronoun, you will have to make a more ambitious revision. In particular, look for opportunities to eliminate a gendered pronoun that is the subject of a subordinate or MAIN CLAUSE, as in these next sentences (pronouns and referents boldfaced, subordinate clauses italicized):

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language *if he wants to seem modern and progressive*.

*If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, he* should use gender-neutral language.

But be careful with these next options, because when you eliminate subjects of sentences and clauses, you risk cutting “doers” or characters and making your writing unclear (see Lessons 3 and 4).

Rephrase using a relative clause: You can replace a subordinate clause with a RELATIVE CLAUSE (underlined) introduced by *who*, *whom*, or *whose*.

- ✓ A **writer** who wants to seem modern and progressive should use gender-neutral language.

Rephrase using a gerund or nominalization: You can use a GERUND (a word of the form verb+ing that acts as a noun) or NOMINALIZATION (a verb turned into a noun) to avoid repeating a “doer” or to cut it entirely (main subject underlined, gerund and nominalization italicized).

- ✓ Using gender-neutral language makes a **writer** seem modern and progressive.
- ✓ The use of gender-neutral language makes a **writer** seem modern and progressive.

Rephrase using the passive voice: You can also switch from the ACTIVE to the PASSIVE voice (passive verb capitalized).

- ✓ Gender-neutral language should BE USED if a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive.

Rephrase using an infinitive phrase: You can use an infinitive phrase (underlined).

- ✓ To seem modern and progressive, a **writer** should use gender-neutral language.

But watch out for DANGLING MODIFIERS (see p. 155). In that last sentence, the modifier doesn’t dangle, because the infinitive phrase modifies *writer*, the subject of the main clause. In this one, it does:

To seem modern and progressive, gender-neutral language should be used.

It is the *writer* (not *gender-neutral language*) who wants to seem modern and progressive.

Alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns. Finally, you can alternate between *he* and *she*, as I have in this book. Some readers find this solution stylistically intrusive, but it is an option that is becoming increasingly popular.

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